



## **The humanist approach in Nadine Gordimer's A Sport of Nature and Burgers Daughter: Beyond politics of Colour and Religious Dogma**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Nadine Gordimer had spent her entire life writing about the Apartheid regime and its struggle for racial equality. Though often criticized for being a Marxist and endorsing leftist ideals, Gordimer has never compromised with the humanitarian aspect in her fiction. The techniques and motives devised by Gordimer for defying racial segregation and superiority are not just political but sexual and instinctive. She resists religion that divides people or makes the female body sacrosanct. By showing racial unity through sexual and intimate relationships between people of colour she discards codes and morals of the racially superior ruling class. For Gordimer, South Africa is a land of both the native blacks and coloured settlers. Her fiction is replete with the socio political

complexities that individuals of varied ethnicity undergo during times of segregation and her fiction appeals for an all-inclusive society of egalitarian brotherhood.

**KEYWORDS:**

Anti-Apartheid, segregation, humanity, sexuality, religion, race, inclusiveness, equality

"Nadine Gordimer, who through her magnificent epic writing has -- in the words of Alfred Nobel -- been of very great benefit to humanity."

The Swedish Academy of Nobel Prize (1991)

At the age of sixty seven, after writing more than two hundred short stories and ten novels about people, society and politics of the Apartheid era and vehemently protesting, participating in the Anti-Apartheid struggle, Nadine Gordimer became the first South African to win Nobel Prize in literature in the year 1991. The committee clearly clarified that the prize was given to her for her immense contribution to literature, fighting censorship and government persecution and not for her political affiliation or inclination to a particular political cause. It is true she was a politically active person, a dynamic member of the ANC and was influenced strongly by Marxist ideology and Leftist politics. But this does not make her fiction, novels of propaganda or a medium to convey political issues. In fact she boldly criticizes and writes about the limitations of these ideologies in her novels. Her critic Bazin points out, "her concern is

not with ideology, but with the ambiguous consequences of ideology on the lives of individual women and men". (25)

As an Anti- Apartheid writer, the primary aim of Gordimer was to write about human beings, uphold humanity, endorse brotherhood and also sketch the complex lives of people during and after the Apartheid era. She has charted the emotional and political geography of that troubled land with sheer intelligence and grace. As delineated in her books, South Africa emerges as a place blessed with extraordinary potential yet hacked by shocking acts of unjustifiable brutality. Nadine Gordimer boldly spoke about her catch-22 position and warned the world in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech how an author risks both the state's condemnation as a traitor and the freedom movement's complaint that he/she has failed to demonstrate blind loyalty. This particular conflict was part of Gordimer's own experience as a South African writer. She condemned the government policies of Apartheid on one hand and at the same time wrote openly about the shortcomings and limitations of the freedom movement and political parties. She in fact chose to risk her position and convey the reality, as she wanted to bring out the actual truth and serve humanity in the best possible way; "the author serves humanity only as long as he utilizes the word against his own loyalties too." (Gordimer, Nobel Prize 5)

Being a humanist she understands and asserts that love, relationships and dependency on one another are universal human emotions and cannot be barred and deliberately forbidden by a political agency, methodically dividing people on the basis

of color and externalities. Gordimer's novels are highly sensual and sexuality between people of color specially natives and Afrikaans is a common thematic phenomena found in several novels and short stories. She declares "...what is Apartheid all about... it is about the body, physical differences, it is about woolly hair instead of straight blonde hair .The whole legal system is based on the physical, so that the body becomes something supremely important."(Peterson 44)

Gordimer's narrative is very subtle in stating how the difference in the texture of one's hair and color of one's skin shapes the destiny of two people so very differently in the same country. It inevitably places a white South African at a fairly high pedestal and labels the black native as 'inferior'. Hillela, being a white young girl in *A Sport of Nature* is definitely at an advantageous position than Whaila and while she is still at this point in the story politically naïve, Whaila turns out to be a revolutionary, challenging Apartheid laws in his country:

...where he and she come from all these become interpretative meanings of the differences seen, touched and felt, of skin and hair. The laws made of skin and hair ...their gaudy savagery paints the bodies of Afrikaner diplomats under three- piece American suits and Italian silk ties. The stinking fetish made of contrasting bits of skin and hair, the scalping of millions of lives, dangles on the cross...Skin and Hair, it has mattered more than anything else in the world.(82)

Hillela is a nonconformist, amoral, libertine who does not affirm to conventional morality or white codes of conduct as expected by the country's law. She is all

embracing, lacks sexual prejudice and there is sheer celebration of sexual freedom while she trusts only the instinct of her body. Here sexuality between Hillela and Whaila serves the twin purpose of confirming human love, untarnished by racial bigotry and deconstructing differences based on color, texture, hair and appearance. The conversation in bed between the two affirms that beneath the skin, internal structures of human beings are all the same and the exterior cannot or should not control universal, primal human desires and emotions:

Look at your nails, they're pinkish mauve because under them the skin's pink...And this-the lovely, silky black skin I can slide up and down (his penis in her hand), when the tip comes out, it's also a sort of amber-pink. There's always a lot of sniggering about the size of a black man's thing, but no-one's ever said they aren't entirely black-

-And what do you think about the size now?-

-I suppose they vary, same as whites' ones." ( 84)

The act of sexuality and procreation also metaphorically depicts Gordimer's higher vision of a post-Apartheid South Africa based on mutual love and faith, unblemished by categorization or labeling of people according to their ethnicity.

Similar to *A Sport of Nature*, in *Burger's Daughter* too, Gordimer reflects her dissent against deliberate labeling and the color bar, through universal acts of children. The imagery is quite unique, while describing the dirty deeds of children she

establishes the idea that children and their habits are not controlled and guided by the selfish adult prejudices. Therefore even a filthy habit is pure and spontaneous. Gordimer said in her essay 'What the Book is About' against the banning of (*Burger's Daughter* where it was stated she deliberately wrote dirty stuff unfit for a gentleman's reading ) anyone who observes little children growing up in any part of the world or of any color will witness how their habits are similar. If a white child wets the bed at night so does a black child, differences are perceived only in the adult world corrupted by selfish motives. Rosa grew up with Bassie, the black son of a revolutionary Isaac Vulindlela, working closely with Lionel Burger. Rosa later recollects how as a five year old she and Bassie had wet the bed and derived warmth from each other: "I was remembering special, spreading warmth when Bassie had wet the bed in our sleep...but in night I didn't know whether this warmth that took us back into the enveloping fluids of a host body came from him or me."(138)

Children do not judge their playmates on the basis of their color and indulge in the same habits because their perceptions and conducts are not corrupted or fashioned by the adult world. *The Burger's* house is one such place where:

in an intimacy of self-engrossment without the reserve of adult accountability, accepting each other's encroachments as the law of the litter, treating each other's dirt as our own, as little Bassie and I had long ago performed the child's black mass, tasting on our finger the gall of our own shit and the saline of our own pee.(70)

“Nadine Gordimer explores in her imaginative writing her characters’ bodies and their sexuality as the locus of conflict, tension, contradiction, revolt against white familial values and the social system of Apartheid.”(Sakamoto 10). So one way of revolting against this white familial value system is by showing incest. The conventional idea of family, civilization, superiority in culture, refinement of the whites is subverted when white characters repeatedly indulge in incestuous relationships. Rosa Burger, the white protagonist and daughter of a highly reverential communist hero, also indulges in sexual relationship with a black boy Bassie, with whom she grew up and called him brother. Gordimer is also a realist and not all relationships between blacks and whites end up in utopia, (this is an ongoing struggle and therefore interracial relationships are a ongoing challenge). Unlike Hillela whose sexual and personal relationships and marriage with two black men are successful, Rosa’s relationship with Bassie turns out to be disastrous and tragic. When she meets him after a long time in London, he accuses her of taking undue advantage of being the daughter of an Afrikaner hero who has not even cared to know the real name of childhood mate. Disgusted he declares he has nothing more do with her in the future “-why should I see you Rosa? Because we even used to have a bath together...I’m not your Bassie, just don’t...don’t think of that black ‘brother’, that’s all”. (210)

Another similar trait that one can find in these two novels is that it is a black lover/ brother who initiate the white female protagonist in launching herself completely to the Anti-Apartheid movement. In other words the influence of the black

male acts as a catalyst in inducting the white women into the cause of freedom for the blacks. Again metaphorically it indicates that this struggle for equality and South Africa's future will remain incomplete without the wholehearted participation of the whites and every ethnic group must join hands to eradicate Apartheid segregation. Hillela in *A Sport of Nature* had so far led a very spontaneous, frivolous, casual life of the senses. But after the death of her black revolutionary husband Whaila Kgnoski she actively dedicates herself in fulfilling her husband's dream. Her microcosmic love for a man translates into the macrocosmic vision of seeing Whaila's country bereft of racial prejudice. After this incident she lives her life only for the cause and we witness a complete transformation in her character. The once spontaneous Hillela now becomes calculative, planning every action in her life even choosing her personal relationships in a manner that would help her achieve the ultimate goal. She spends the rest of her life talking about the cause and lecturing in American Universities, holding camps for black women in Rhodesia, visiting refugee camps and as a humanist and activist gains trust and support of the blacks. The novel ends with Hillela the "white woman", "wearing African dress", "the striped, hand-woven robes and high-swathed head cloth that is the national dress of the woman of the President's country", watching "a flag slowly climb, still in its pupa folds, a crumpled wing emerging, and ...now! - it writhes one last time and flares wide in the wind, is smoothed taut by the fist of the wind, the flag of Whaila's country." ( 354)



Like Whaila, Bassie, or rather Zwelinzima Vulindlela the black brother/lover of Rosa in *Burger's Daughter* also plays a significant role and catalytic function in Rosa's final decision of voluntarily returning to South Africa. In a telephonic conversation Bassie, accuses Rosa of taking an undue advantage of her white skin, asks why only a white leader's death in jail is celebrated while hundreds of blacks also die in prison every year. Rosa being confronted with black hostility and rejection interrogates her position in white South Africa and her sensual escapade to France. In the end of the conversation Rosa vomits in front of the bathroom mirror "soiled" (324), and laments "Wanting to be loved !-how I disfigured myself. How filthy and ugly, in the bathroom mirror." (329). She accepts the black premise and comes back to be a part of black struggle, in a place "where she believes she is fully alive."(322) She gets arrested and detained like her parents, for having assisted the student's revolt. The humanist approach is reflected in the end when for the first time in her fiction Gordimer tries to create black and white sisterhood in the liberation struggle. In the closing pages of the book she writes about Marisa(black), Rosa(white), Clare(mixed) and an Indian associate, "...these women were in touch with each other, if cut off from the outside world."(356). Marisa and Rosa, two women one black and the other white are together charged for "collusion" and "conspiracy" and together they are applauded for their contribution to the cause by another white lady Flora Donaldson: "The visitor carried two wooden fruit-trays and a big untidy bunch of daisies and roses from her own garden.-Rosa Burger and Marisa Kgosana. Their names are on labels..."(359).

In Gordimer's fiction, sexuality and bodily union, resentment, conflicting ideologies, friendship, betrayal among the races all serve as a symbol for this combined struggle for the future of South Africa where black and white individuals not only complement each other they make the purpose of the Anti-Apartheid movement complete. Whaila makes Hillela's life complete, as Hillela declares "seeing herself as unfinished, left off somewhere.." (84) and later she says- "when we are together, when you're inside me, nothing is missing"(85) and Rosa's life too gets a purpose in supporting the Students Revolution. They reflect Gordimer's vision that the lives of whites will remain void, empty, and futile if they turn a blind eye to the liberation struggle and the Revolution will also remain incomplete without 'White Participation'.

In 1977, Gordimer responded to black's rejection of white liberalism. She said that despite dismissal and opposition, whites could still find a role in the struggle for black emancipation by seeking a new "consciousness"-

If we declare an intention to identify fully the struggle for a single, common South African consciousness, if there is such a thing as white consciousness it is a way to human justice- we shall have to accept the black premise and the entire stand point of 'being white' will have to shift...( Writing in the Interregnum 21)

This 'shift' in question is a white man/woman's ability to perceive the self not as a colonizer but as a South African, giving his/her complete assent in an equal, just legal system, fiercely opposing Apartheid and doing humanitarian work to support the

underprivileged, tormented black population. We find such philanthropic characters in her novels dedicating their lives completely to the struggle and the cause. Pauline and Joe, Hillela's aunt uncle and are the prototype of the white family completely aware of the political condition and deeply motivated to bring in the change South Africa is looking for. Paula actively participates in the "supplementary education committee KNOW", instructs her children to always help out the blacks and participates along with them to various rallies and protest marches. Carole and Hillela paint banners "Not to a Racist Republic" and distributed leaflets.

Gordimer has time and again raised her voice against inferior education granted to the Blacks, she truly incorporates humanist ideals in speaking, lecturing and writing about the importance of a good education for all, considering the future of South Africa. Bantu Education Act had segregated schools for black and white children. Obviously the black children were given inferior education and the government found no reason in spending money and upgrading the lives of black youth. They were happy to grant everything second-rate to them and this was a strategy not to let the blacks rise above the laborer class with low-grade wages. In both *Burger's Daughter* and *A Sport of Nature* she mentions the conditions, politics and uprisings regarding the 'education of the blacks'. While *Burger's Daughter* depicts the black rebellion for equal rights in education and the white woman ending up in prison for supporting the just cause, *A Sport of Nature* very satirically presents the politics of the privileged white and their education system. In the very beginning of the novel we see Hillela Gidding is rusticated from her

school in Rhodesia for being spotted with a colored boy. The Christian boarding for girls maintains its absolute white status quo when it came to racial segregation while preaching Christian tolerance and brotherhood. Paula her liberal aunt and a social activist support her saying “what Hillela did in Rhodesia wasn’t wrong-nothing to be guilty about...”(66)

Pauline and Joe in order to avoid segregated education for their son Alexander, send him to a “school for all races, over the border in an independent neighboring black state”.(18 )But their daughter Carole and Hillela is sent to an expensive private school for whites which supposedly did not encourage racism of any sort. But Carole comes home crying one day after witnessing a young white girl shout at a black waiter serving meals to students in class saying “Don’t lean your smelly arm over my face.”(21) Pauline makes it a point to complain to the school authorities who claim, whether black or white disrespect towards support staff was intolerable. She laments that even in an expensive nonracist school one would still find “racism free”, her complete disgust along with Gordimer’s scathing criticism of white pretensions

Exactly idiots we have been. (19) No possibility to buy your way out of what this country is. So why pay? Racism is free. Send them to a government school, let them face as it’s written in your glorious rule of law, canonized by the church, a kaffir is a kaffir, God Save White South Africa – anything, anything but filth of ladylike, keep-your-little-finger- curled prejudice (19).

This is where we see a 'shift' in consciousness and the new white consciousness rising, trying to imagine and work out a new classless, non-prejudiced, equality based South Africa. Soon we find the school change the system when a "self-service canteen had replaced the black waiters for reasons of economy." (22) It is ironical that instead of grooming young minds towards racial tolerance and dictums of brotherhood they choose to keep the black population and fellow countrymen out of the periphery of white children so that racial prejudice ingrained in the young minds is never altered. While they reason that for economic conditions they have taken this decision they do not bother to find out what the jobless waiters would do and how they would sustain themselves. The ignorance of rich white girls towards the condition of their country or their fellow black counterparts in inferior black schools is disparagingly presented by Gordimer- for when Carole initiates the debate in school "should there be different standard of education for blacks and white children?...most of the girls have not heard that 'Bantu Education' have been introduced in the country, and there is a better attendance for 'Should we have sex education at school?'" (21)

As a humanist, Gordimer's fiction is replete with Anti-Apartheid comments, exploring the trying, unjust conditions of the blacks. But her fiction also gives a complete picture society. Unlike the novelists who preceded her like Alex La Guma and others she does not completely eliminate the whites from the freedom struggle. She talks about the dilemma, the double standards, and the difficult interracial relationships in the trying times between the black and white communities. Paula's son Sasha was to

be recruited into the state military service according the dictates of the country's law. It was a real dilemma for him because he grew up in a house which was actively participating in the liberation movement, had black friends and was now required to serve the same military men who had to kill blacks indiscriminately "At Kambhlaba blacks were just another boys in the same class, in the dormitory beds, you could fight with them, confide in them, masturbate with them, they were friends or school boy enemies.(329)" Completely at a loss, betrayed and troubled he could only blame his parents for the situation when they themselves could do nothing to help matters improve.

But Gordimer wants to convey that despite the dilemmas, complexities in interracial relationships and varied opinions, all is ultimately fine if it is genuine concern and attempt at changing South Africa. The following quote is important to understand her point of view:

I make no apology for creating characters and situations that are as truthful and imaginative evocations of South African realities as my abilities can achieve. There are no "goodies" and "baddies" among the many characters both blacks and whites represent a full range of human qualities which are never unmixed within the individual. The facts of life in South Africa are foundation of the novel ...there always have been and still are people who, having accepted social responsibility...change the

South African way of life which all now admit, to one degree or another, is just to blacks and must be changed.(Bazin 31)

Gordimer has also spoken about the wrong doings of the black and the torture inflicted upon them without indulging in gory detailing. In order to portray the injustice, inhumanity in which fellow countrymen are degraded and humiliated no better than animals she talks about the double standards of people specially religion. She openly declares in an interview "I'm an atheist. I wouldn't even call myself an agnostic. I am an atheist." She was bold enough to state how the Dutch Church had full support in defining and establishing the Apartheid policy, "the ugliest creation of man, and they baptized the thing in the Dutch Reformed Church, called it Apartheid, coining the ultimate term for every manifestation, over the ages, in many countries, of race prejudice" (Peterson 12) Therefore without any religious sentiment or moral affliction she makes the hypocrisy of religious people and religious institutions transparent.

South African novel made a new foundation with Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* which suggests a need and resolution through Christian doctrines to the political problem of racialism. By the time, Gordimer was writing such idealism, Christian optimism and religious consolation infusing the book seemed sadly questionable. Critic Joel Carlson in his book, *No Neutral Ground* makes a similar assertion, losing complete faith the religion and white Afrikaner government; "The Afrikaners (devout Calvinists) have always considered themselves the civilizing force

in the country, having trekked inland by Ox-wagon, carrying a gun in one hand and a Bible in the other.”(164).

The initial pages of *Burger's Daughter* we see how little Rosa is one day allowed to see one of the “occasional letters”(18) that came to her home. It said her father was a “devil and a beast who wanted to rob and kill, destroying Christian civilization”(18), but Lionel Burger the revered communist leader has his own explanation for being the so called devil. In a way he is also voicing Gordimer's opinion as to why the liberal Afrikaners of modern times have no faith in religion or the existence of God. The Europeans had come to Africa with a Christian civilizing mission and then used power, knowledge, and force to reduce these people to sub human level

. To civilize the savages', such was the pretext used by the colonizer to justify his invasion of the so- called Dark Continent. Purity of race is an obsession with all Afrikaners and is at the root of all trouble in South Africa. To maintain the purity of their bodies, they have forsaken the purity of their soul and have equated human dignity with the color of a person's skin. (Gandhi 42)

Lionel Burger becomes a Marxist after witnessing years of torture, poverty and misery of the blacks: “Black men, women and children living in the miseries of insecurity, poverty and degradation on the farms where I grew up, and in the “dark satanic mills” of the industry that bought their cheap labor and disqualified them by color...”(25) He did not want to “worship the God of Justice and practice discrimination on grounds of



the color of skin ; profess the compassion of the Son of Man, and deny the humanity of black people they live among.”(25) It is ironical that on one hand Christianity preaches the doctrine of brotherhood, benevolence and love and those who practice the faith are cruel, exploitative and unjust towards another human being. Whether Marxism is the right alternative to counter injustice and demand equality or what degree Communism as an ideology has successfully helped in the liberation movement are questions secondary. What is important here is the fact that religion can offer no consolation to victims of Apartheid who has been subjected to exploitation, violence and humiliation for no other fault but their color for centuries.

In *A Sport of Nature* the criticism is not only targeted at Christian institution but also towards the Zionist religion. Gordimer is herself a Jew who grew up with other Christian Afrikaner people. In the very beginning of the novel, Hillela is dismissed from a Christian Boarding School for girls “where only white children were admitted”(3) for she was seen with a colored boy. To such an orthodox institution even considering acquainting oneself with another human being of inferior color is a crime worth leaving the school forever. But the most sarcastic criticism of religion is in the name Hillela. This girl was named after her grandfather and Hillela is the feminine version of Hillel. Hillel was one of the greatest Jewish leaders and a prominent figure in Jewish history. But the protagonist Hillela has no sense of religion, let alone worshipping a God of any kind. She is the woman who without being religious or moral, strives and devotes her life for the freedom struggle. Religious doctrines preach that the human body is

sacrosanct and should not be made freely available to be tampered with. The bodies of women are specially related with ideas of sanctity, chastity and virtue. But Hillela trusts only her body and devoid of religious, social constraints celebrates sexuality. Nadine Gordimer has very intelligently drawn the analogy between Apartheid system based on the external features or the body and female sexual availability to advance the cause liberation movement. Her narrative deconstructs the sanctity associated with the female body and religion which talks about human love only in theory and not in practice.

Violence is pain and death...a girl who did not have the Jewish faith under which one school had listed her , nor the Christian faith in the promises and threats of morning prayers at the next school; at most, something like an old age, in which no seventeen year old can believe for herself.(76)

Having no faith in religion Gordimer now only has faith in humanity and love of mankind for one another. She says

I have no religion, no political dogma only plenty of doubts about everything. Except my conviction that color bar is wrong and utterly indefensible, thus I have found the basis of a moral code that is valid for me, reason and emotion meet in it and perhaps this is near to faith as I shall ever get.(NewYork Times 12)

Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu, who was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985, said about Miss Gordimer: "She's an outstanding artist, has a way with words but more than anything else she has had this tremendous commitment and caring about people, caring about justice." (Berret 41) It is true she is a tremendously talented writer but above all she has dedicated her entire writing career to the cause of the Apartheid struggle and will live through her work as one of the finest writers of Anti- Apartheid fiction. Nadine Gordimer truly embodies the value which Alfred Nobel wanted the winners of the prize to have "those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind". In concluding one may say Gordimer's work reflect that humanity must be reaffirmed, struggle and survival is victory, both in fiction and life.

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